

JOHN KEATS' TO AUTUMN: AN ECOCRITICAL READING

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ABSTRACT

Ecocriticism is of special importance in our contemporary world not just because of its growing significance in the academia but also because of its indispensable nature. The environment today is a threat and it is quite certain that every literate man today is aware of the situation. Global warming, water and oxygen crisis, pollution, the melting of the polar ice, hole in the ozone layer, etc are just some of the issues that need to be addressed. The increasing number of natural calamities, like the Tsunami, cyclones, and earthquakes that are causing substantial damage to life and property, prove that environmental issues cannot and should not be ignored. Ecocriticism seeks to read literature from the viewpoint of the environment and to unearth the ecological concerns of the authors. Mere awareness of facts has proved to be rather ineffective when it comes to environmental issues. What is required is a holistic approach to the issues and that is where literature can prove to be an important medium. We have already observed what great difference literature can make while dealing with social issues like female rights and rights for black men and what has made literature succeed it is the holistic approach. There is no reason why literature cannot be as effective when it comes to the environmental problems.

KEYWORDS: Ecocriticism, Global Warming, Water, and Oxygen Crisis, Pollution

INTRODUCTION

The reason for choosing John Keats' 1819 ode, *To Autumn*, for analysis from the viewpoint of the ecocriticism is not just because it is a romantic poem where ecological perspectives are supposed to be explicit but because it is a poem that unconsciously contests superficial standpoints and attempts to establish a more real and meaningful relationship between man and the environment. *To Autumn* is a critically acclaimed poem. Walter Jackson Bate has called the poem, "one of the most nearly perfect poems in English" (58), and Douglas Bush has said that it is "flawless in structure, texture, tone, and rhythm" (176). However, many critics have also talked about the silence of the poem on political matters. Jerome McGann, for instance, has commented on the poem as an "escape" from the period which provides it its context (61). *To Autumn*, indeed, is almost perfect when it comes to structure and form and, even, language, but its supposed silence is often misinterpreted. My argument is that the poem is an attempt to do away with ornamental standpoints which very much defines nineteenth-century Romanticism. For instance, the relationship between man and nature that William Wordsworth establishes in his poetry can be treated as superficial. Treating nature as a deity or as a superior being or moral order does not necessarily establish any real connection between man and nature. Harold Bloom has rightly said that the subject of Wordsworth's *Tintern Abbey* is "the nature of the poet's imagination" and "imagination's relation to external Nature" (221). Bloom sees Wordsworth primarily as a poet of imagination and not of Nature. Jerome McGann criticizes Wordsworth for his superficiality and considers his poetry as "extreme forms of displacement and poetic conceptualization" (117). One of the key ideas in Wordsworth's *Tintern Abbey* is finding consolation in a natural

landscape which is rooted in his imaginative construct of nature. In *Wordsworth: the Sense of History*, Liu comments on Wordsworth's neglect of history and further adds that without history "a landscape, after all, is not a landscape; it is wilderness" (108). In other words, Wordsworth's nature is a subjective and imaginative construct that often seems displaced from history and therefore fails to establish man's relationship with nature that a layman can relate to. The treatment of Nature as the basis for a superior moral order can be found in Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* as well. Even Shelley's *To a Skylark* and *Ode to the West Wind* treats nature on ideological terms.

Keats, on the other hand, talks about a real connection between man and nature. I admit that the connection is often missed and even misinterpreted but, at least, he makes an attempt to talk about a real connection. In the first paragraph of *To Autumn*, by celebrating the fruits of the season he is actually talking about something that is arguably the most significant dependence of man on nature. One can deny or ignore the impact of the melting of the polar ice to a certain extent but one cannot possibly deny that nature provides man with food. In this context, one must say that synthetic food has, to date, proved to be quite inferior to natural food. Man can survive without believing that nature can offer the man a more stable moral order but without food, he cannot exist. Even the flowery beauty of spring and summer that is much celebrated in British poetry is superficial, to say the least. Being a Romantic poet and a poet who has made a name for himself for being a worshipper of beauty, Keats is very much aware of the significance of beauty in human life. But in his poetry we always find him negotiating for a space for real and meaningful beauty. *Ode on a Grecian Urn* is a case in point. "Beauty is the truth, truth beauty" is not a philosophy; it is an attempt to merge the real and the aesthetic (Keats 49). The celebration of flowers cannot establish a real or scientific connection between man and nature but fruits provide sustenance to man and therefore the connection is much more real.

The second paragraph of the poem is even more interesting:

Who hath not seen thee oft amid thy store?

Sometimes whoever seeks abroad may find

Thee sitting careless on a granary floor,

Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind;

Or on a half-reap'd furrow sound asleep,

Drows'd with the fume of poppies, while thy hook

Spare the next swath and all its twined flowers:

And sometimes like a gleaner thou dost keep

Steady thy laden head across a brook;

Or by a cyder-press, with patient look,

Thou watchest the last oozings hours by hours. (13-24)

Apparently, it is a celebration of agrarian activities described by a poet who seems to be allured by the visual beauty of the phenomenon but it will not be wise to disregard the images as totally apolitical. Andrew Bennett says, "The politics of agriculture had potentially revolutionary implications in the early nineteenth century due to the repeated minor

uprisings of rural workers agitating against the 1815 corn law, enclosures, and generally against oppressive economic conditions" (157). We must also keep in mind that the Industrial Revolution was gaining momentum when Keats was writing this ode and slowly but certainly the industry was replacing agriculture as a more commercially viable vocation. Keats does not make any explicit political statement in the poem but the celebration of agrarian activities with the Peterloo massacre and Industrial revolution in the background is rather hard to be ignored as a merely aesthetic exercise. Even the bees of the first stanza collecting honey in late summer and autumn under an illusion of abundance and ignorance of the approaching winter can be taken as a reference to the workers who are unaware of their real plight in the economic circumstances of the times and the bleak future that is awaiting them. Keats is a Romantic poet and therefore it is safe to assume that his political support inclines towards the agrarian workers.

Even without the historical background, the second paragraph is significant because it draws the attention of the readers to activities which are often taken for granted. Even Thomas Gray who is extremely sympathetic towards the rural populace in his *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* basically talks about their lack of opportunities and exploitation. Gray talks about what could have been and not what is. Keats's attitude towards the workers is something that cannot be restricted to the narrow connotations of sympathy. What he sees in the activities is the labor of real value and meaning. But the ease of the activities that are suggested by his language speaks volumes about his perception of rural life. Whenever a Romantic poet talks about industrial life and workers his attitude is one of sympathy and his voice is critical. Blake's *Chimney Sweeper* is a case in point. In *Chimney Sweeper*, Blake talks about labor which is not just demeaning but which dehumanizes as well. In *To Autumn*, Keats talks about labor in natural conditions and that explains the ease that marks the agrarian worker's activities. Sympathy is unimportant in that case. Gray was an urban poet who could only feel sympathetic towards the ploughmen. But in Keats's case, the poet seems to be indulging himself while watching the harvesters and the gleaners. In fact, Keats does not even talk about the labor but he dwells on the personification of Autumnas being seated, resting, watching, and even sleeping. Even the image of the gleaner balancing the grain on her head suggests certain motionlessness. The cider press oozing the last drops of juice can barely suggest any major activity. In other words, Keats sees it as labor which does not really take a toll on the workers' physical and spiritual being. It is the complete opposite of what is suggested by Blake's images depicting urban and industrial life in his *London*:

I wander thro' each charter'd street,
Near where the charter'd Thames does flow.
And mark in every face I meet
Marks of weakness, marks of woe. (1-4)

The fact that Keats celebrates nature in *To Autumn* has never been doubted but critics have always raised questions about Keats's attitude to the phenomena. It has been assumed that he has been rather aloof in the poem and has maintained a certain level of objectivity in the poem. But the fact that Keats chooses not to relate himself to the scenes he describes should not be interpreted as not making a statement. By talking about the drowsy relaxed nature of agrarian work he is actually sending a message to a nation which is making a shift from a feudal agrarian economy to a capitalist industrial one.

The last paragraph of the poem again challenges the aesthetic presumptions of the early Romantic poets. By

rejecting the “songs of spring”, Keats is not just celebrating the often unnoticed sounds of Autumn but also criticizing his fellow poets for being incapable of a holistic attitude towards Nature (Keats 13). Autumn is as significant as spring or summer maybe even more because it is the time when fruits become ripe and grain is harvested. It is time for immense activity, a time when the human beings prepare to survive the onslaughts of the approaching winter. It is busyness that often makes the man miss the many beauties of autumn but Keats’s portrayal of Autumn in the second paragraph suggests indolence. There is, however, no contradiction. It is a message that is coming from a poet who has matured from the restlessness of the 1819 spring. Keats believes that though there is much activity in autumn there is no distress. The activities are soothing, relaxing, and are a cause for celebration.

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